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Courageous Dreamer: War Through The Eyes Of Lincoln's Sculptress

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Review

COURAGEOUS DREAMER

War through the eyes of Lincoln's sculptress

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Sappy, Maureen Stack *Letters from Vinnie*. Front Street, ISBN 1886910316

In 1861 Vinnie Ream begins a nine-year correspondence with her friend, Regina. During that time Vinnie confides her concern about her family's worrisome finances, her feelings of adoration for newly inaugurated President Lincoln, her confusion over her brother's sympathy toward the Confederacy, and her own mixed feelings toward two potential suitors. Vinnie's letters detail the family's move to Washington, D.C., as well as the everyday pace of their lives during the War years.

Sappy's epistolary novel perfectly captures the tone of many Civil War correspondents: the overwrought phrasings, the sentimental tone, and the detailed narration. For example, when Vinnie learns of Regina's fianc's death at Castle Thunder prisoner of war camp, she writes: "This is the most difficult letter I have ever written, for each word is torn from my heart. If I could hide the truth from you, I would -- but I cannot. Dear friend, your beloved Edward died early yesterday morning."

Living in Washington, Vinnie has an insider's view of the War. Vinnie is an observer, not a player, however, and in order to bring her in contact with the events of the times, Sappy relies too much on coincidence. For example, Vinnie's sister goes on a date -- a picnic at Manassas on July 21, 1861. In another case, Vinnie and her mother enjoy an intimate tea -- an outing perfectly timed to coincide with the announcement of the Emancipation Proclamation. On another occasion, Vinnie attends Lincoln's second inauguration -- the receiving line parts, and Frederick Douglass appears, thus allowing Vinnie to introduce yet another historical figure in her narrative.

What the book offers is a readable, personal history of the War, including observations about its horrors (Vinnie visits hospitals) and its intrigues (she discusses McClellan's political aspirations and military failures). But history, even when well told, does not a novel make. What is lacking technically is strong characterization to move the episodic plot. Vinnie, who after the war sculpts the statue of Lincoln now in the rotunda of the Capitol, tells what she does but reveals little about the internal motives that drive her. For example, she dispassionately writes of her growing interest in sculpting, "I haven't told you before because I didn't want you to think me a braggart, but I have already completed several busts of prominent Washingtonians." Such reporting distances readers from Vinnie, who must ultimately carry the novel -- not as a character who witnesses many things, but as one who is herself worth knowing.

Betty Carter is a professor of children's and young adult literature in the School of Library and Information Studies at Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas.